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Al: How CIA bungled on Pope

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WASHINGTON — New York Sen. Alfonse D'Amato accused the CIA last night of ignoring the most damning evidence of Soviet-Bulgarian links in the plot to kill Pope John Paul II.

In an interview, D'Amato said the CIA never even bothered to investigate whether a Bulgarian airline official arrested by Italian authorities in connection

with the assassination attempt was an intelligence agent.

D'Amato said the CIA, nearly six months after the official was arrested, still doesn't know whether the official is an agent of the KGB-controlled Bulgarian Secret Service.

In fact, the senator says, all the agency knows about the official is that his knowledge of the airline business is minimal.

The CIA admits this glaring gap in its massive intelligence-gathering machine despite the fact that the official, identified as Sergei Ivanov Antonov, has been in an Italian jail since November.

The new twist to the story about the "Pope gap" was first revealed to D'Amato by the CIA's top man in Rome last month.

And members of the Senate intelligence com-

mittee verified last night that they have received similar information during recent CIA briefings.

Antonov, an employee of the Bulgarian national airline, was one of three men Turkish gunman Mehmet Ali Agca said helped him plot the assassination of the pontiff.

Antonov is accused of helping Agca plan the assassination attempt, accompanying him to St. Peter's Square for a "rehearsal" of the shooting,

and planning to help him disappear after the shooting.

But despite the worldwide publicity surrounding Antonov's arrest, D'Amato was told, the CIA still has not been able to determine if Antonov indeed has links to the Communist bloc spy network.

But he said Italian authorities have confirmed that Antonov was a member of the Bulgarian Secret Service.